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Catastrophe vs. Tragedy

Interview with Annette Becker, historian of the Great War and of extreme violence in the 20th century

Tragédie vs catastrophe. Entretien avec Annette Becker, historienne de la Grande Guerre et des violences extrêmes du XXe siècle

Tragedie vs. Catastrofe. Interview met Annette Becker, historica en specialiste op het gebied van de Grote Oorlog en het extreme geweld van de 20e eeuw

Annette Becker

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Close-up

Catastrophe vs. tragedy

Interview with Annette Becker, historian of the Great War and of extreme violence in the 20th century.[1]

Let's begin by discussing your background. How did Annette Becker become an historian of the Great War, with a very specific focus that differentiates her from her colleagues?

Annette Becker: In fact, I'm an historian of the Great War by default. I started with a doctoral thesis in history on the American religious awakenings of the 18th century. Religion, faith. I've always been interested not in church institutions, be they Protestant or Catholic, but in what we believe when we believe, how we believe when we believe. A chance event had it that I "encountered", so to speak, war memorials while working on a commission from an archaeology publisher. I was living in New York at the time, and I got a phone call: "We'd like you to write about war memorials." I was a bit surprised, but not entirely, since I'd always had a passion for war memorials, and until that time, no one had really taken an interest in them. Antoine Prost had of course discussed them briefly in his thesis on veterans. He had noticed a relationship between the veteran and the war memorial, but he saw it more from a social history point of view. He tried to locate everything in them except death, if I dare say so: tributes to the Republic, pacifism or its opposite – but he didn't see the way death had plastered itself everywhere. That's what I tried to highlight in that book, which changed my academic career, my research, and my thinking. Not that I hadn't worked on violence before, because religious violence was extremely prevalent, as was the case with my Presbyterian ministers fighting so terribly in the 18th century. But with war memorials, I discovered the violence of war, which was obviously something quite different. The second chance event was my meeting with Jay Winter after he read my book. He then asked me to join the team for the new museum that was being developed: the Museum of the Great War in Péronne.

However, the team already included a man named Jean-Jacques Becker – my father – and it was out of the question to work with him when I had gone all the way to the United States to "flee" him. And there I found him working with the people who were to become my spiritual fathers, Jay Winter and Gerd Krumeich, the American and the German. It also gave me an opportunity to meet Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau. So I had two incredible strokes of luck. The work on war memorials took me out of my 18th century, where I was more or less happy. Then came the Museum of the Great War, after which I completely re-directed myself: the subject of the work for my accreditation to supervise doctoral research focused on the violence of war, specifically on faith in times of war. That work was never published in its entirety, actually, only sections here and there.

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My first real book was entitled *War and Faith, From Death to Memorial*.[2] Finally, faith moved to the background while death and memory became my priorities. The two other intellectuals who really influenced me were Étienne Fouilloux and Maurice Agulhon, who died last May.

So working with a team of historians of such calibre was decisive...

Annette Becker: What that First World War circle gave me was immense international openness. You cannot understand a world event by looking at it through the magnifying glass of the fifty kilometres between Soissons, Laon, and the Chemin des Dames. Whence my difficulties with some of my colleagues in France. If we have such deep disagreements about the way to "make the history of the First World War", it's not so much due to what they say against our approach, it's because they are so Franco-French, and they only understand France through the prism of French politics – those of the time, and especially today's politics. That war was a multi-polar war, even though it took place massively, on one front, on French and Belgian territory, and on the other on German-Russian and Austro-Russian territory, in the Balkans, and in the Ottoman Empire; it had specificities relative to all aspects of the belligerents. Seeking to understand it from only one side comes down to understanding nothing. The representation of that conflict largely continues to be done from the French side, as if we could not manage to put ourselves on both sides, indeed on all three, four, or five. We need for instance to understand why the Australians circled the globe to come fight here when there was no one making them do it; there wasn't a police officer behind every Australian!

> **Frankly, the debate about consent and coercion is completely outdated, ridiculous. It originates in a very French way of seeing things.**

Frankly, the debate about consent and coercion is completely outdated, ridiculous. It originates in a very French way of seeing things. The experience we embarked upon twenty years ago when we all started working together, which, to some extent, was synthesized in *Retrouver la guerre*,[3] was just that: trying to see how, by being on the western front and having a more thorough knowledge of French, German, and British historiography, we could get to the heart of a global phenomenon, a phenomenon that the English word global communicates more fully than the French *mondial*. We need to talk about globality while also letting national, social, gender, and other differences, of course, show through.

Following the course of the body of your work, we see that a time comes when you turn toward civilian populations.

Annette Becker: Yes, I took an interest in those who were marginal: prisoners, occupied populations, civilians in general, and, among them, women, of course. In a way, we knew "too much" about the combatants. So I looked into those who were combatting in another way, focusing on the plight of civilians, the "forgotten ones of the Great War", to borrow the title of one of my books.[4] They really were forgotten. That led me to work on civilian massacres. After a few detours I came to the Armenians, to the specificity of, shall we say, the rejection of the other, of the racism of the Great War and the way we eliminate the other during it. The Armenians led me to Raphael Lemkin, and from there, to the Shoah.

The idea is that the First World War is a military front that cannot be understood in isolation from all the other fronts. It's not only a question of the home front, but also all sorts of other fronts that are like laboratories poised to become, after that war, central fronts for the rest of the century: the occu- •••

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(2) Becker, Annette, *La guerre et la foi, de la mort à la mémoire, 1914-1930*, Paris: Armand Colin, 1994.

(3) Audoin-Rouzeau, Stéphane & Annette Becker, *14-18, Retrouver la guerre*, Paris: Gallimard, 2000. (*14-18 : Understanding the Great War*, New York: Hill & Wang, 2002.)

(4) Becker, Annette, *Oubliés de la Grande Guerre : Humanitaire et culture de guerre, populations occupées, déportés civils, prisonniers de guerre* [The forgotten ones of the Great War; the humanitarian and the war culture, the occupied population, the deported civilians, the war prisoners], Paris: Noêsis, 1998.

_ German cemetary of Neuville-Saint-Vaast, near Arras (Nord-Pas-de-Calais).

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pations front, the prisoners front, the hospitals front, the massacres front, the voluntary labour deportations front, and finally, the extermination of civilians front, called, starting in 1943, *genocide*. The Great War harbours that whole set of situations. All we need to do is understand how it harbours them and how we can create meaning from that.

We are about to enter an intensely commemorative period. Are we sufficiently aware of what is at stake?

Annette Becker: What seems interesting to me in the Centenary is that, after having put the *"poilus"*, the French infantrymen, front and centre, we realized that we couldn't completely separate the soldiers from the society, as if they were holding their breath underneath their country, in their trenches. We realized that if we didn't work on civil society, those on the home front, those behind the lines, if we didn't work on all the people whose lives were completely different during the First World War, we could not understand the 20th century.

There have been advances in understanding in which the Belgians were very involved: about the occupied zones, deportation for forced labour, the massive use of concentration camps in the First World War sense, meaning internment camps very different from what they would become. Even so, taking Belgians, Frenchmen, and Russians hostage and transporting them, sometimes very far from home, making them wait in camps behind barbed wire and watchtowers, that's not the Great War we're accustomed to imagining. I see so much in common with the Second World War that I can partly forget the soldiers, the guns, the gas.

Civilians, that means everyone. All over the world. I'm thinking of the Australians of German origin who were locked up for four years. They were denaturalized at the start of the First World War because they could have taken up arms against their new country. I'm certain that, for the Centenary, many people will realize the extent of the phenomenon. That awareness is positive, and produces meaning, whereas at first I was afraid it would be a bit like the Centenary of the French Revolution: a general move towards banalities

_ Mass graves in the Rzuchów forest. Jews were burnt here after being gassed in Chełmno (Poland) between December 1941 and September 1942, and later in June and July 1944.

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and an epistemological retreat from new historiography. I'm a little more optimistic about it now.

Though we tend to disparage the commemorations, does that indicate to you nonetheless that they can also harbour an epistemological opening; that is, be productive of knowledge and not only of doxa?

Annette Becker: I think we achieved something positive. We created advisory boards for the Centenary, alongside the big political events. It's clear that the big political events are the ones the general public is most aware of and that will prevail. I'm thinking, for instance, about what François Hollande will do on 11 November: a fine demonstration of the misunderstanding of the conflict. In the Pas-de-Calais, near the Lorette cemetery, he will unveil an enormous ring on which will be engraved the names of all of the First World War dead in the Pas-de-Calais region. It is currently being built, an absolutely huge job. A regional effort to address a global conflict. They are putting all the dead together, in alphabetical order. The reasons they fought, the fact that they knew very well that they were German, Austrian, Australian, or Welsh: all of that will disappear in that ring thing where we are all brothers in the mass death of that horrible event that marked the beginning of the 20th century. It is the "great event of 11 November 2014" that was sold to François Hollande by the socialist politicians of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region, and especially by Daniel Percheron, the president of the region, having found historians who are convinced of the correctness of the mission and do not understand that it rests on the most irenic possible vision: "They all died the same death together, so their cause was the same, it's a terrible waste."

Should we see a sort of assimilation of those deaths to the victims of genocides and, from there, the influence of Holocaust memorials?

Annette Becker: Absolutely, that's exactly what's happening. A lot of intellectuals have noted and underlined it: the only death we are able discuss is death in the Shoah. The model has imposed itself.

I would say that the model has – for very complex reasons that we won't objectivise during this

meeting – imposed itself, or been imposed, through a combination of speeches and positionings, in a very specific way in France.

Annette Becker: Which completely negates the specificity of the First World War. Precisely, on that level, it is a point that – thanks to UNESCO and the listing of the burial sites – led me to think a great deal and strengthened my convictions. In fact, I spoke recently with Jay Winter because he used the word *catastrophe* in reference to the First World War, and I disagreed with that. In my opinion, we should use the word *tragedy*. He retorted that that it's the same thing: tragedy, catastrophe. But it isn't at all. In a tragedy, we are equal in relation to each other. That was the case of the soldiers, they were equal in the their way of being, equal while different. Whereas in a catastrophe, as with the Shoah, there is no equality between those who kill and whose who are killed.

Conversely, we fight for the Shoah not to be discussed as a tragedy.

Annette Becker: Absolutely, the Shoah isn't a tragedy, it's a catastrophe. There's something noble in a tragedy. Jay Winter could use the term catastrophe because of the horror of mass death, but mass death is not the same as mass murder. Where there was mass murder during the Great War, it was during the Armenian catastrophe, or the internal displacement of Jews (and Russians of German origin) on the Russian front. Apart from those two events the difference is clear, and it should absolutely be visible in commemorations for a very simple reason: what did we do during the First World War?

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_ Lorette commemorative ring (computer generated image), on which will be engraved the names of 600,000 soldiers of all nationalities dead in French Flanders and Artois between 1914 and 1918.

We tried everywhere, on every front, in extremely difficult conditions, to bury the dead. Including the bodies of the enemy, while the war was ongoing, and including dead prisoners. The respect for the war grave: that is what we see with the war memorials – in towns, but also in the soldiers' former workplaces, in schools, at the Bibliothèque Nationale, the Louvre museum, train stations, etc. The war grave transported everywhere, to parishes with memorials in Catholic and Protestant churches, to synagogues, etc. We re-humanize the dead. Whereas during genocide, with mass murder: no graves. Everything is done to hide the traces. That is also the catastrophe. All tangible signs of death are erased. For the soldiers of the First World War – and in that way they fall within the scope of a phenomenon that really took form during the Civil War – respect for the soldier was extended to the dignity of the tomb, which we find on both sides of the belligerents. In a catastrophe, there is no reason, not a single one; you can think of every reason in the world, but they are all wrong, all false, so you do not respect the dead, do not bury them. You try to destroy every trace of how they died, but also every trace of death itself.

Precisely. Those historians, doing their utmost to denounce the theory of consent, arguing that all soldiers were pushed to slaughter, despite themselves, end up condoning those irenical political speeches. Paradoxically, to grant dignity to the victims, they invoke the massacre model, which actually removes all dignity from the victims, so they end up in glaring contradiction with themselves. Fooled, in the end, by the generalization of the universalized model of mass murder, of the genocide model.

> **During genocide, with mass murder: no graves. Everything is done to hide the traces. That is also the catastrophe. All tangible signs of death are erased.**

Annette Becker : Absolutely. They use a model that, in fact, denied dignity. Whereas during the Great War, it was the opposite. If people today, for the Centenary, go to the military cemeteries and admire their beauty – in particular the beauty of the German military cemeteries that are extremely well-planned to be seen as heroes' gardens (a very romantic vision, by the way) – that indicates that, however terrible and industrial that war was, an element of respect for the human being remained, which we do not find in genocide. And that is really a point that separates us from those who promote a kind of amalgamating pacifism.

That said, that war was obviously terrible, and one mustn't imagine that, for us, talking about consent denies the suffering, the unspeakable horror of what was committed – that would be to take us for fools. The non-historical thinking about this problem is to make the period from early August 1914 to 11 November 1918, one enormous melee during which we never stop fighting or getting shelled. That war was also incredibly strange. You could be in the same place for three weeks and nothing would happen. You'd get bored. That aspect is still little known, not clearly perceived.

There is a political deviation and an illusion among certain historians who have been taken in, so to speak, by their noble sentiments and their credulity at the current doxa about mass murders. Nonetheless, with the advisory boards, there is a knowledge-producing momentum, a genuine scientific breakthrough, don't you think?

Annette Becker : Indeed, a lot of historians around the world have written books, collective and individual, and a lot of work is being published. We can't read it all anymore, there is too much. There is very serious preparatory work taking place. Important syntheses are emerging, and many conferences are organized. The problem is that I don't know how all of that is going to come together, because we can't keep abreast of it all. It is interesting to see how researchers in the Anglo-Saxon countries are generally very interested in colonial populations, including in the French colonies, while the French are still very far behind. In addition, just about everywhere around the world, for the commemorations, people are taking the opportunity to reflect on the past century. That's very positive. Beyond the trench and bayonet fanatics, we are trying to think about combat conditions, occupations, civilian massacres, etc. In contrast, the official commemorations all tend to focus on 1914-1918. I wonder what the end result will be, because people will get pretty fed up. And we've still got four more years of it. It's really too much.

Interview conducted by Luba Jurgenson and Philippe Mesnard on 5 June 2014